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## Spirituality, Physical Disability and Literature: A Study of Milton's *On His Blindness*

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### Abstract:

*Writers are sensitive beings and it goes without saying that any change in the political, social, economic order casts a significant impact on writers. One of the distinctive features of many poets is the spiritual element in their poetry. Spirituality and creation of poetry both involve indulgences of higher faculty and thus it cannot be denied that poets have often ventured into the spiritual arena. Spirituality has a strong link with society as well and when writers take it up as a subject it definitely casts an impression on the readers who are naturally drawn towards the subject. Milton's poetry delved into spirituality and the present paper intends to study this element as used by Milton in his famous poem On His Blindness.*



*On His Blindness as a poem is a perfect amalgamation of meditative thoughts that are triggered in the mind of the poet due to a physical ailment, blindness. Eventually, due to his firm faith in God, the poet draws strength from spirituality to regain his emotional balance.*

**Keywords:** *Spirituality, creation, society, higher faculty, physical ailment.*

John Milton is regarded as one of the greatest English poet of the late Renaissance period. He desired to rise to an immortality of fame through his poetry and with the aid of God and was actually able to do so as well. Milton was an avid reader who read both classical and modern works of religion, science, philosophy, history, politics and literature. Milton had a good command over several languages like Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, Spanish, Italian and Dutch. Though Milton was not a theologian but most of his poetry exemplifies that he developed his greatest thoughts on theology. Milton's poetry is at once a reflection of English Calvinism on one hand and broad-spirited Humanism on the other hand.

Milton was a mixed product of his time. On the one hand, as a humanist, he fought for religious tolerance and believed that there was something inherently valuable in man. As a Puritan, however, he believed that the Bible was the answer and the guide to all, even if it curbed man's freedom. Where the Bible didn't afford an answer, Milton would turn to reason. (www.gradesaver.com)

David Daiches commented on the inexplicable and contradictory views of Milton in the Puritan age when he wrote, "Christian and Humanist, Protestant, patriot and heir of the golden ages of Greece and Rome, he faced what appeared to him to be the birth-pangs of a new and regenerate England with high excitement and idealistic optimism." (Wikipedia)



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Some of the most famous poems of Milton are ‘**Lycidas**’, his masterpiece ‘**Paradise Lost**’ (the epic poem), ‘**Paradise Regained**’, and ‘**Samson Agonistes**’. Milton’s greatness can be judged from this fact that William Wordsworth begins one of his famous sonnets with this line “Milton thou should’st be living at this hour” and Keats’ also admitted that his ‘Hyperion’ also draws inspiration from Milton to a large extent. Milton influenced several writers of his age as well as in later ages, for instance, Thomas Hardy and George Eliot of Victorian Age and Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot of Modern Age.

John Milton was a Puritan. Cambridge dictionary defines Puritan as “a member of an English religious group in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who wanted to make church ceremonies simpler, and who believed that it was important to work hard and control yourself and that pleasure was wrong and unnecessary”. (dictionary.cambridge.org) Milton served in Cromwell’s government as secretary for foreign languages and during the years of English Civil War Milton advocated religious freedom and the freedom of the press. “During the English Civil War, Milton championed the cause of the Puritans and Oliver Cromwell, and wrote a series of pamphlets advocating radical political topics including the morality of divorce, the freedom of the press, populism, and sanctioned regicide” (poets.org).

In his prose works, like *Of Reformation*, *Of Prelatical Episcopacy* and *Animadversions*, Milton suggested the necessity of reforming the Church of England. These works are a critique on religious hierarchy. Milton advocated the abolition of episcopacy (the government of the church by bishops) on grounds of inherent corruption. In *Of Reformation*, Milton asserts that anyone who “steps up into the chair of pontifical pride, and changes a moderate and exemplary house for a misgoverned and haughty palace...then he degrades, then he unbishops himself” ([www.bl.uk/restoration-](http://www.bl.uk/restoration-)). In *Areopagitica*, Milton spoke against censorship. He said that scripture being available to all people, need not be explained by senior church officials because public have their own minds and should be allowed to search, try and examine things as to what is good or bad and right or wrong. Then in his four ‘divorce tracts’, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, *The Judgement of Martin Bucer Concerning Divorce*, *Tetrachordon* and *Colasterion*, Milton who had been propagating personal freedom, advocates that divorce being a private affair should not be handled by Parliament or Church but should be granted on the grounds of mutual incompatibility. Roberta Klimt quotes Milton’s views “If that human, companionable aspect of marriage is not recognized by law...then that union is little better than ‘brutish congress’, a coming-together not of humans but beasts, bound by nothing more than carnal compulsion.” ([www.bl.uk/restoration-](http://www.bl.uk/restoration-))

Regarding ‘religious toleration’ Milton strongly argued that “disestablishment” was the only effective way of achieving broad toleration. “Rather than force a man’s conscience, government should recognize the persuasive force of the gospel.” (Wikipedia citation of William Bridges Hunter, *A Milton Encyclopedia*)

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Born in 1608, it was in 1651-52 that Milton became completely blind. Milton's poetry went on to influence poets like Shelley, Blake and Wordsworth. Milton's epic poem **Paradise Lost** tells about the Fall of Man with the intention of justifying the ways of God to men. In the words of Simon Heffer, "It is hard to go beyond *Paradise Lost*. One could spend (and some have spent) a lifetime considering the nature of its composition, dissecting Milton's quite peculiar brand of religious thought as displayed within it, noting the originality of his language (a tour through the Oxford English Dictionary reveals just how many words were coined by him) and revelling in the sheer, and subtle musicality of his verse" (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/>). The poem **On His Blindness** speaks volumes about Milton's devotion to God and also is a proof of Milton's resignation to the will of God.

Milton's **On His Blindness** is a beautiful Petrarchan sonnet of iambic pentameter that establishes Milton's firm faith in religion and God. The poem has an autobiographical tone and as readers we are told that the poet lost his eyesight though he had not lived even half his life. The poem is a discourse in which the poet talks to God while searching for answers to his queries. He feels that he has been unjustly punished by God and that it was very unfair on God's part to have taken away his vision while the poet earnestly wanted to devote his life in service to God through the pursuit of his only talent, that is, creative writing.

When I consider how my light is spent  
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide  
And that one talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent... (23)

The word "talent" is a Biblical reference to the 'Parable of Talents' from Matthew XXV. "A lord gives three of his servants some money ("talents") to hold on to when he leaves for a trip. Two of the servants use the money to gain more money for their master.... But the third servant just buries the money.... When the lord returns, he's happy with the first two servants and gives them more responsibilities, but furious with the third servant. He exiles the third servant into the "darkness, "..."(<https://www.shmoop.com/consider-light-spent-blindness/>).

The words "dark" and "death" quite perfectly bring out the pessimism and disappointment that the poet has been feeling after being physically handicapped. The poet has been severely hit by this mishap and does not know how to cope up with it. Further, by employing words like "spent" and "useless" the poet is able to successfully convey to his readers the hopelessness and despair that has spread over his consciousness in a way that there seems no chance of him surviving it or fighting it out. "John Milton criticizes our modern achievement-oriented society in his sonnet "On his blindness" because nowadays performance is a precondition for high regard and appreciation of somebody. However, his poem can serve as a statement in favor of a person's

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worthiness independent of one's performance and workload.”  
(patrickonhisblindness.blogspot.com)

The two words in the first stanza, “light” in the first line and “soul” in the fourth line, quite interestingly and intrinsically weave a belief that holds the shaking self of the poet. “Light” though on the surface level suggests about the eyesight but on a deeper level the word “light” also hints towards the divine glory of God. So while at one point the poet is definitely referring to the physical disability that rests with him and is going to last till his death, but at the other end it also suggests whether the light of God, the supreme knowledge and wisdom of God will remain with the poet or will it abandon him due to his inconsistency in the faith. Again, when the poet uses the word “soul”, we realize that the poet is not commonly arguing at the level of body. He is actually referring to the higher faculty of his being, that is, soul. The involvement of “soul” immediately changes the dignity and the sublimity of the poem in a positive way making the subject of the poem and the poet’s discourse more dignified and sublime.

In the second stanza we find that the poet asserts that his soul is more inclined towards serving his “Maker” and presenting his “true account” but then forgetting the words of God and one of the basic principles that we must learn to persevere, to uphold our firm faith in God, to let God have His way as He only knows what is best for us, to accept, love and live life happily and contentedly, the poet falls to a baser level and grumbles.



“Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”

I fondly ask:—(23)

The poet childishly asks that does God expect the poet to be as productive and laborious in his work post-blindness as he could do previously. The poet, however, gets the answer that those who are able to gladly accept whatever life offers them are the ones whom God really adores because such people are devoid of any malefic feelings and satisfaction and contentment does not let them envy other people. They hardly get any time to criticize or condemn or complain because they do not find themselves lacking in anything. Since they do not suffer from want they are free from frustrations of all sorts and thus are healthy people who bring positivity around them.

The poet’s appeal to God and his protest is suddenly silenced and atoned when “Patience” (23) (personified in the poem) explains and answers the query of the poet in order to prevent the poet from committing any further sin and adding to his own toil. In a way, this can be understood in the following way that in a calmer and meditative state of mind, when the poet came to terms with his own self and his perplexed mind was cooled down to be in harmony with God, he was able to receive answers from his own inner self. “Patience” or the inner voice of the poet gave the following answer:

... “God doth not need/Either man’s work or his own gifts. Who best

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Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best....”(23)

The inner consciousness of the poet consoles the poet by saying that God never desires favors from human kind. The realization asserts that God does not expect nor demands that human kind must work for him or offer him donations or gifts (which actually are God’s own plenty and He would not want them in return). The conscience of the poet awakens him to a simple truth associated with God that those who have the courage and perseverance to tolerate the “mild yoke”, that is, the miseries, burdens, difficulties of life without being unhappy, rude and intolerant about them, they are the true followers of God and His most loved ones as “they serve Him best”.

God is the Creator and his stature and position is “kingly” (23). He is the regal, majestic monarch who has thousands of angels (good spirits) at his command who travel across the land and the seas tirelessly to fulfill the commands of Gods. They are always eager and prompt in their services to God. And finally Milton concludes the sonnet with the most famous and the oft-quoted line of Milton: “They also serve who only stand and wait.” (23) Thus Milton confirms his faith in God and his ways. He establishes that God’s ways are unfathomable and we as his followers should not get impatient with God’s decisions and should also not question justice meted out by Him.

The sonnet follows an Italian structure abbaabbacdecde and has two parts octave (first eight lines) and sestet (last six lines). The octave talks about the problem which the poet has been struggling with whereas the sestet changes the tone of the poem completely. So while the octave raises the complication to the height, the sestet provides solution to the problem by removing the barriers and clearing the doubts.

Milton’s **On His Blindness** is a remarkable poetic piece that confirms the poet’s unflinching faith in God. The poem has a universal appeal despite being a purely personal experience that has been related in the poem. The poem travels across time and space and has not lost its charm simply because it is easily understandable and relatable. The physical disability of the poet and his fight with his own doubts and wavering faith act as an ‘objective correlative’ so that the concept of ‘sadharnikarna’ as used in Indian critical theories can be aptly applied to this poem. The candid, conversational tone with simple diction does not lessen the inspiring, transcendental quality of the poem. It rather enriches the feel and the spiritual fervor.

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